

NEW STUDY UPDATES PICTURE OF HOUSING SEGREGATION IN SEATTLE

By the Seattle Office for Civil Rights

Has the pattern of housing segregation changed in Seattle?

If you asked that question last year, the answer would have been long on anecdotes but short on hard data. Not so today: a much clearer portrait of the Emerald City has emerged, thanks to a new report entitled "Housing Segregation in Seattle." The report updates a study released in 1976 by the Seattle Office for Civil Rights, back when it was known as the Human Rights Department.

"The Seattle Office for Civil Rights commissioned this study because we needed a clear, objective picture of current conditions in Seattle," said Germaine W. Covington, director of SOCR. "We knew that the city's demographics had changed greatly in thirty years, but we had no easy way to look at the data and determine if our neighborhoods reflected those changes."

Kate Davis wrote the study as part of her Master's Degree program at the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs. "This project resonated with me personally because I think fair housing is such a critical issue," she said. "It draws on a lot of different public policy areas, from zoning to illegal discrimination." Davis drew her statistical analysis from the Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB) developed by the Urban Institute and Geolytics, Inc. The NCDB uses the last four decades of U.S. census data, reconfigured so that all census tract boundaries stay consistent from year to year.

The new report updates the findings of the 1976 study by asking several key questions:

- How have patterns of housing segregation in Seattle changed since 1976?
- What are the causes of continued segregation in Seattle?
- What has been the impact on housing segregation of government policies that target discrimination, affordability and accessibility?

The study confirms what many Puget Sound residents already have noticed: Seattle and King County have become more diverse, and Seattle's neighborhoods have grown more integrated. In 1960, none of Seattle's neighborhoods north of the Ship Canal were more than 2% non-white; by 2000, all of Seattle's neighborhoods were more than 12% households of color. In 1960, suburban King County was home to roughly 20% of the county's non-white population; by 2000, 60% of the county's households of color lived outside Seattle's city boundaries. Census figures reveal that African Americans in Seattle remain more highly segregated from whites than are Asians and Latinos. At the same time, white people are more likely to live in "same group" neighborhoods than are people of color.

"Ironically, in some neighborhoods white people have become the most isolated of any racial group," said Davis. "That doesn't mean the housing choices white people have made are consciously motivated by race. But it does indicate that a variety of individual choices have created clear racial patterns."

Discrimination, economic access and personal preference all play roles in perpetuating housing segregation – but it is hard to pin down a precise formula. "A lot of people think class plays a large role in determining the racial diversity of neighborhoods. But the data doesn't show that," said Davis. "Segregation is not simply a product of economic access – it is driven by racial discrimination and individual preferences."

Enforcement of fair housing laws is an important tool, but statistics from fair housing agencies do not capture the full incidence of discrimination. Because the enforcement process relies on individuals' coming forward with complaints, many incidents continue to go unreported. Local data from a study commissioned in 2004 by the Office for Civil Rights also suggests patterns of discrimination in lending, especially involving African American and Latino households.

Within King County and Seattle, zoning and affordable housing policies both have helped to reduce the level of racial segregation in housing. Since 1970, practically every neighborhood in Seattle has experienced an increase in the number and proportion of multi-family units. In 1978, Seattle began to build more affordable rental housing outside of the City's low-income, minority neighborhoods, including more than 8,000 units financed by the Seattle Housing Levy. Seattle voters have renewed their support for the levy several times since it was first passed in 1981. The bulk of these affordable housing units have been located outside of low-income neighborhoods.

Local policies have been guided by the State's Growth Management Act, which encourages denser development in urban areas. Public policies, however, have been unable to withstand the pressures of fast-rising home prices. The hyperactive home sales market has made even Seattle's Central Area – once one of the only neighborhoods where African Americans could live in Seattle – unaffordable to many middle-income households.

"Seattle is different from other American cities in its housing patterns," said Davis. "I grew up in Washington D.C., which is becoming more segregated. Seattle's neighborhoods are becoming more diverse. We've made progress here, and I think that's something we can be proud of."

To read the full report, visit the Seattle Office for Civil Rights web site at www.seattle.gov/civilrights/outreach.htm. Scroll down to the Housing section under "Publications."

"This report illustrates the complex relationships between housing, the economy and discrimination, and the difficulty of making housing opportunities available on an equitable basis," said Covington. "We need to continue working with mortgage lending institutions, real estate professionals and non-profit housing groups, as well as maintain our strong ties to the rental housing community."

Have a question about fair housing in Seattle? Call the Seattle Office for Civil Rights at 206-684-4500 (TTY 206-684-4503), or find SOCR on the Web at www.seattle.gov/civilrights.